

Viewpoint

Tibetans Rise Up, as Hope Overtakes Fear on China's Western Front

With the 2008 Olympics Shining a Spotlight on Beijing, Tibetans Rise Up in Open Rebellion, Shaking the Foundations of Communist Rule

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Introduction

Recent events on the Tibetan plateau have mesmerized millions of freedom-loving peoples around the world, as thousands of Tibetans have risen up in a series of mass-protests throughout their traditional homeland in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Yunnan, Sichuan and Qinghai provinces of southwestern China, protesting Beijing's 49-year rule of their nation and calling for religious freedom and in some cases outright independence from Beijing.

China's vituperative response—the Communist Party boss in Lhasa condemned the Dalai Lama, the world renown Nobel Peace Prize winner and advocate of nonviolence who serves as both the spiritual leader of the estimated six million Tibetans, and as the head of its government in exile in Dharamsala, India as a “wolf in monk's robes, a devil with a human face, but the heart of a beast”—and its deployment of thousands of police, military and special forces in an effort to contain this unexpected, and unexpectedly widespread, rebellion after a surprising hesitation in the days immediately following the initial protests, suggests that Beijing might have been caught off-guard by the scale of the rebellion, and felt compelled to demonstrate a show of force to remind not only Tibetans but China's other restive minorities that it would again unleash its armed forces against its own citizenry to restore order, just as it did two decades ago at Tiananmen Square.

As the tanks rolled in, government officials ejected foreigners from Tibetan areas, and clamped down on foreign media coverage of the uprising, and began to round-up participants in the at-times violent riots, which had targeted not only government buildings, but private businesses owned by ethnic Han and minority Uighurs, whose influx has left Tibetans as a shrinking minority in their homeland.

In contrast to the last wave of violent protests in Lhasa in 1989, this time around much has changed—both inside China and around the world. First, much of the world has been closely monitoring each move made by Beijing in anticipation of the start of the 2008 Olympics, with Free Tibet activists hoping to draw attention to their cause as the world's spotlight illuminates China for all the world to see. And second, technology has accelerated beyond the point where the state

can as effectively control the flow of information: no longer is there a complete monopoly on news, as cell phones, digital camcorders and camera-phones capture China's response to the uprising, beaming them around the world via the ubiquitous Internet.

Technology's Double-Edge

As seen in Burma this past summer, one of the least connected and most repressive societies on earth, a stream of information freely flowed onto the Internet as its monks rose up in a nationwide, nonviolent rebellion against the unpopular military dictatorship, calling for religious freedom and democracy until the government turned loose its armed forces to suppress the revolt. Burma, in an effort to contain the viral spread of truth and graphic imagery of its violent crackdown against its brave but unarmed monks, unplugged the nation from the Internet, shut down cell phone service, and in addition to deploying its armed forces, it scrutinized each and every frame photographed and posted on the Web, looking to identify protest organizers to arrest, interrogate and imprison (and sometimes execute.) The very tool that brought the Saffron revolution to the world was used to douse its flames by targeting participants and organizers for punishment, preventing a second act to the surprise summer drama that was unfolding across Burma.

China, in contrast to Burma, has a much more advanced economy, a thriving and innovative high-tech sector, and world-class technology infrastructure, making it hard to simply pull the plug as Burma did, since China's economic wellbeing depends upon its continued connectivity and integration with the world economy. However, it has developed a modern highway and railway system connecting the once-isolated Himalayan mountain kingdom to the rest of the country, allowing for a full-scale military incursion to restore order. And it has deployed a sophisticated, albeit imperfect, firewall to censor the Internet's most irritating content, dubbed the "Great Firewall of China." So it is able to apply its full military and technological might to contain the restive Himalayan region; but just as the American military has learned in Iraq, ease of conquest does not translate into an ease of rule. Political order requires a level of buy-in from the populace, and this requires an approach to counterinsurgency that wins over the hearts and minds of the conquered, never an easy task.

Just as we saw in Burma six months ago, China is trying its best to use the very same contemporary tools that beamed images of that rebellion around the world as a tool of information operations to suppress further outbreaks of violence, reviewing each and every frame recorded, looking for organizers, activists and participants in acts of violence against Chinese authorities, innocent civilians, and both public and private property. So far it has incarcerated some 1,000, and it continues to surround restive monasteries, locking its monks inside and demanding they renounce their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, whose popularity remains high, even if his message of nonviolence is not universally shared by a young population that has seen the world respond so favorably to the use of force and violence in the quest for independence, such as that wielded by Kosovars against their Serbian oppressors, winning widespread recognition for February 17, 2008 declaration of independence—even though they are but a small minority province that has long been a constituent part of the Serbian state.

Violence vs. Nonviolence

Young people in Tibet recognize that violent rebellion has proven efficacious in the struggle to win independence against a superior foe time and again, and this seems to have diluted the tactical and strategic influence of the Dalai Lama during this year's rebellion. And yet, the embrace of violence by so many Tibetan youth only reinforces the utility of the Dalai Lama's leadership for Beijing, since his "Middle Way"—a path of nonviolence that aims to win autonomy from China while remaining a friend of the Han Chinese and a part of the People's Republic—becomes all the more attractive to Beijing, which logic suggests would prefer a peaceful partnership to a violent secessionist struggle with the potential unravel the sovereign fabric of the Chinese state.

And yet, China continues to denounce the Dalai Lama, calling him a terrorist, among other things. As reported in the *People's Daily*, "The Dalai Lama is scheming to take the Beijing Olympics hostage to force the Chinese Government to make concessions to Tibetan independence," and the "Dalai clique has also strengthened collusion with East Turkistan terror organizations and planned terror activities in Tibet."

The Tibetan Diaspora

Among the six million Tibetans in the world, most still reside on the Tibetan plateau, but according to a 1998 census some 111,170 live in exile, with 85,000 in India; 14,000 in Nepal; 7,000 in North America; 1,600 in neighboring Bhutan (mostly consigned to refugee camps as tiny Bhutan struggles to maintain its own demographic majority); another 1,600 in Switzerland; some 750 in the rest of Europe; 1,000 in Taiwan; 220 in Australia and New Zealand; and 60 in Japan. This diaspora, while small in number, has asserted a powerful moral and diplomatic presence, with international celebrities dedicated to the cause of a Free Tibet. Indeed, just a week before protests began in Tibet in March, the world famous Icelandic singer Björk shouted "Tibet! Tibet!" at the end of her song "Declare Independence" during a concert in Shanghai, a song that includes the lyrics: "Don't let them do that to you. Raise your flag!"

The music industry's embrace of a Free Tibet goes back over a decade. First came the 1994 release of the Beastie Boys album, "Ill Communication," and with it the launch of the Milarepa Fund, an organization named after Milarepa, the 11th-century Tibetan saint who used music to enlighten the people, to disburse royalties from the album to benefit Tibetan monks. The fund organizers joined the Beastie Boys as they headlined the 1994 Lollapalooza Tour, when the idea of holding a "Live Aid"-styled concert for Tibetan independence was born. The first took place in 1996, headlined by Björk and including performances by Radiohead, Smashing Pumpkins, and Rage Against the Machine, and over 100,000 people attended, raising over \$800,000 for the Free Tibet movement. These concerts continued for three more years, helping fuel the growth of Students for a Free Tibet.



An Interview with Arjia Rinpoche

While the Tibetan community in the United States is small, numbering some 7,000 in the 1998 census and estimated to now be over 10,000, there are numerous Tibetan temples, monasteries and cultural centers across America, including the Bloomington, Indiana-based Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center.

In 2005, the Dalai Lama appointed Arjia Thubten Lobsang Rinpoche as the director of the center, and where I caught up with him for a recent interview.^[1] Arjia Rinpoche is a Tibetan lama who

escaped to the West in 1998, and the author of a recently completed monograph recounting the history of Chinese rule in Tibet. The story it tells he describes as the “inside story of lots of kind of very interesting [events].” As he explained, “I want to be [an] eye-witness,” and “I would like to share the story with the world, that is my main goal.”

His manuscript covers “very sensitive issues in Tibet,” including Beijing’s officially recognized Panchen Lama, and the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, and the more recent Great Western Development Program on Tibetan culture. He was an actual participant in the selection process that identified Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the eleventh Panchen Lama in 1995, and witnessed first-hand China’s effort to manipulate the selection process when it rejected the Dalai Lama’s pick with its own “Golden Urn” lottery method, through which the government selected Gyaltsen Norbu as the Panchen Lama, after which the Gedhun Choekyi Nyima disappeared into “protective custody” from which he has never returned.

A Middle Way Forward

The Dalai Lama has long called for a “Middle Way” approach to change in Tibet, seeking autonomy and co-existence within China, but not outright independence, and calling for only the use of nonviolent methods to achieve this end. His strategy is reminiscent of Gandhi’s successfully applied concept of Satyagraha, or “truth-force,” designed to induce a moral transformation of the opponent so that in the end there can be both victory and friendship with the opponent, rather than defeat and enmity. Arjia Rinpoche discussed the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way noting there “maybe some kind of similarities here, but I guess it is different” as well. For instance, he noted he is “Tibetan from inside Tibet,” but that “lots of Tibetans grew up in India or the United States or Canada so not in Tibet,” and “our concept, we have a patriotism for our country, we love our country—that is all the same. However, our understanding towards the approach—the solution to independence or democracy, is different. We’re all different. His Holiness’ idea is exactly in the middle.” In contrast, in some “outside countries—you can see, realize, the use of violence,” and noted that “Tibetan associations or some people are very positive for that: they say, ‘okay, we’ll just go and attack Chinese embassies in different countries or something like that—in India, Nepal, the police come, arrest them and all that. But the next day, a lot of people come and do a press conference, protesting.” And “then, still the police arrest them.”

But “in China, while this time, in Tibet, they held a big protest and the police also arrested them, it was the same kind of action but with different results. In the U.S., they arrest the one protestor and in China they arrest the one protestor, but it’s a different concept—in the West, they may be arrested but then may be back on the street the next day. In China, the person destroyed their whole life, and their family’s and their relatives’. Today they arrested a lot of people, a lot—they say when they arrest them, they ask them to sign a paper that says you have to say: ‘His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the [instigator] for the events, you have to recognize this, and promise that in the future, no matter what kind of political things [take place], you cant be involved. Otherwise they will torture you, put you in jail, eventually maybe kill you. That’s why the violence, the fight, bears no results in China. That’s why His Holiness says we still need genuine autonomy, you know, self-determination—but not independence, that kind of compromise. In China, the Chinese constitution, if you read it, they say there are a lot of things—freedom of religion, rights to protest, to talk and like that, but there is nothing like that [really] there. In Tibet, the Lhasa area, the heart of Tibet, the Chinese say—in the Tibetan Autonomous Region—they have a different constitution and law, that it’s more free—but this is never used. It’s on paper, but never used, His Holiness said we have to truly use the constitution and let the people have freedom. His Middle Way is under Chinese rule, to use the rules and [constitutional] structure to search for freedom and preserve Tibetan culture and language and everything. We’re searching for real freedom, so that is a different concept that the Chinese will understand differently. The Middle way is the only solution that can solve those problems.”

Anatomy of an Uprising

On the recent uprising, which rapidly intensified and broadly spread after the first nonviolent protest was held by monks on March 10 in Lhasa, Arjia Rinpoche shared “some ideas,” noting that “first of all, for almost fifty years, five decades, under the communists, all Tibetans have struggled with their genuine autonomy. So in another words, we’re fighting our own basic human rights, so that’s the issue. Every March 10th, we have a protesting day that we consider the Tibetan Uprising day—in Dharamsala, India or some other free country. But in China it’s been impossible, in Tibet, impossible,” but “in recent years in Tibet that movement, people are of course [protesting] but the government, they definitely don’t allow you to do that—so the people began using different forms—such as to smoke puja, we do that some times on the mountains, to smoke, say prayers, shout up slogans such as ‘Long life for His Holiness!’ And this year, they exactly started that way. Fifty monks come up from monastery and went to downtown Lhasa for a peaceful demonstration with the Tibet flag [calling for a] Free Tibet and a long life for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it was a ten to fifteen minute protest before the police came and squashed them down—that was the beginning.” Arjia Rinpoche noted that they’ve been “annually doing that one” so it was not of itself an unusual protest on the tenth of March. “Because His Holiness is a peacemaker, the whole world is recognizing that—because of that kind of reason, inside Tibet, Tibetans are very excited, and always remember that March 10th, or His Holiness’ birthday, are always celebrated.”

While the Chinese authorities view the Tibetans as different, Arjia Rinpoche noted that the “Chinese people and Tibetan people or Mongolian people or Western people are all the same, all equal, and have no conflicts—the only difference is the Chinese communists, the government, they’ve controlled Tibet for many years,” and dating “back twenty years, they’ve had a new policy to the Develop the West—Tibet, Xinjiang, and Qinghai provinces.” And while there is “a good name for developing their high-tech, which eventually may make peoples’ lives better there,” if you look “inside, it’s not that good actually; they have their own purpose,” including a “big resettlement program” through which a “big population of Han people are moved to Tibet, and Tibetans are actually losing their jobs, their businesses—you know, so that it’s difficult to survive. For instance in Lhasa, there’s the market on Barkur Street where Tibetans sell a little bit of incense, ritual things like souvenirs and things like that,” as they’ve been doing since “one hundred years ago, just like that. In the ‘50s, ‘60s, I was there, and 99 percent of the stores were owned by Tibetans. But now the difference is that 90% of them are now owned by Han Chinese, so that’s why the Tibetan people so upset. So when they have that kind of protest on the first day, on March 10th, they arrested them right away—but the next day there were more monks, and more people come out to protest for their release. Of course they cracked them down—but on the third day, there were more people, it became bigger and bigger. So on March 14, even more people came out, and it got a little bit violent—that all happened; that’s a very unfortunate thing. But it’s understandable, that’s peoples’ emotions. That’s why that kind of thing happened.”

Arjia Rinpoche noted that the Chinese call it the “March 14 events,” and not the “March 10 events,” and in so doing draw attention to that fourth, violent day and not the three days of nonviolent protest that had preceded them. And in China where the Chinese media is by and large the “only the Chinese media” people have access to, as “otherwise, no media can go to visit—they cut off every foreign media and other media, only Chinese TV and newspapers are telling their stories, their propaganda—always showing what looks like Tibetan guys doing bad things to the Chinese people, and the Chinese were supporting things in Tibet, doing better things for Tibet, but those crazy people came and spoiled that.”

He added that the “Tibetan people are really upset,” and are “fighting for their basic freedoms and their human rights. That’s why all of a sudden the whole Tibetan region, fifty different cities, monasteries, villages, had protests and demonstrations. It’s really difficult to say, but it is kind of an exciting moment. Very shocking, as the Chinese government educated the people, they brainwashed those people, for sixty years—and the result is today they all come out against their

government, with no weapons, nothing—and the very strong, heavily-armed military comes in and cracks them down, using very modern weapons like machine guns, armored cars, tanks—using those kind of modern materials, weapons to kill them, and crack them down. It's a very unfortunate thing, but a very interesting thing is that after fifty years of patriotic education, after fifty years of socialist education, the result is they all stand up against the government."

The spread of the protests across the Tibetan plateau, to over fifty communities, and their continuation despite the crackdown by authorities and deployment of military and paramilitary forces, is unprecedented, particularly given the capacity of the regime to strike hard against dissenters as demonstrated time and again. As Arjia Rinpoche explained, "If in a free country like the U.S. or Europe or some country with basic, you know, rights like those [protected by a] constitution, regulations, legislation and everything based on freedom and human rights like that, that's why the government has much more confidence, and you can see some kind of protests, big demonstrations in U.S. or Europe. Some people look at that, maybe go crazy or a little bit radical, and the police come out like that." In China, "they did this way before, they had that experience to get this country," through the civil war and revolution that gave birth to the Peoples Republic. "But now they are so scared that some other people will repeat their story against them; in Tibet something happened of course. Let's say today there are around six million Tibetans, but we don't really know the number, is it three million, five million? We really don't know. But let's say six million, compared to the 1.3 billion Chinese people. Against 1.3 billion Chinese people, the population is so different—and Tibetan people can't do anything. Why they used these types of [modern] weapons, why do they crack them down, torture them that way? Because they have the fear that the Tibetan issue may become the fuse to other reactions. In China, there are lots of problems there, hiding—all very subtle. Just one thing—one can say lots of things—to know is that every year in China, no matter how big or small, thousands of people gather there, from just a couple of hundred to over ten or twenty thousand, and all added up, every year, it's at least 50,000 or 60,000 demonstrations that appear in China. So the [Chinese authorities] are scared that kind of reaction that happened in Tibet, there biggest fear is it will happen elsewhere. Their propaganda says this is a Tibetan thing, and not a Chinese thing."

And with the continuation of unrest on the Tibetan plateau in the weeks since, and rumors of protests breaking out in other far-flung provinces—from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia—in recent days, the fear felt at the highest levels of the Chinese government are understandable, despite Beijing's vast military and economic superiority. After the March protests in Tibet, Arjia Rinpoche noted that "after that, in Xinjiang, also known as Eastern Turkistan," people have been "searching for independence—and that area also had demonstrations," though inside China there's been a "blackout of the media" so "we don't know the really true story, but I guess at least 2,000 people" participated in an "uprising there." And "yesterday," on April 4th, "I heard that some Inner Mongolians, searching for independence, had an uprising too. Maybe elsewhere in China somewhere also, we don't know—they block all the information." That's "why the Chinese are using this kind of modern weaponry, against one demonstration, for the whole of China so they know they can't do anything. The government is really, really mad, and the government has this kind of modern equipment, and uses this logical, Chinese philosophy. They have a saying: kill the chicken to scare the monkey," and so "in front of monkey, you kill the chicken so the monkey gets really scared." And the government is "really scared of the other people, there are lots of problems hiding in china—that's why they will show the military power." Adding to Beijing's anxiety is that "the Olympics are very important to the Chinese people," and fear what might transpire "should the crazy Tibetans interrupt, destroy the Olympic games."

Arjia Rinpoche recalled how "some years ago" he was "reminded of a story in which one Chinese leader was in an interview with the western media, and was asked by them, is your law stronger than your politics, or is your politics stronger than the law? And that person was confused, and couldn't answer, and said, 'Well, well.' The law, the constitution, they have everything perfect—but they have different rules, policies, and the current policy is that—so they use that and never, never use the constitution." And yet, the constitution protects freedom of religion, and whether

“you believe in that religion or not, that’s your freedom—as non-believers can’t control the practitioners. But if you become a party member, it clearly says the party member never, ever believes in Buddhism, you are kind of a traitor or something like that if you do.” China’s constitution is thus “definitely in conflict” with party policy, and this is true with regard to political protest as it is with religious practice. “You have the freedom of protest, but when you protest they say you are a counter-revolutionary, and they will kill you. You say, ‘the law says that’, and we [the government] say ‘we have current rules that say you can’t do protests, and you did—that is why you are a counter-revolutionary. So the government will always win, the people, the majority, will lose.”

Technology and Rebellion

Arjia Rinpoche discussed how new technology like cell phones, digital cameras and the Internet have helped the uprising in Tibet to spread, and to keep the world informed of events transpiring in a region long isolated from the world. He explained that “technology, and the Internet and the media, definitely make the world different,” and by contrast, “if ten or twenty years ago, something happened in Tibet, no one would know. Maybe they know a little bit, but not like today—today if something happened, they will spread it out as news right away, to the whole world, so if something happens, the world realizes it right away.” But just as we’ve seen in Burma, where the government unplugged the Internet, shut off the cell phone towers, and confiscated as many digital photos and videos as it could to identify and then hunt down protest organizers, “the Chinese government will try to control whatever they can. Today, we just heard some news from Tibet; in a monastery, in some schools, they, the government and the police arrived, and those people came and confiscated all the computers, televisions, cell phones, everything—they searched and after that confiscated all of them—there was no issue, legal or illegal; they just forcefully cut down the Internet lines, telephone lines, everything—a temporary of course of action. They have to show the world, ‘We are number one. We have the freedom.’ But how they control things, I don’t know. So temporarily, everything now is locked out, so that means they at least they have the kind of capabilities to control every media. I don’t know how, but at one point, several years ago, I heard they had 400 secret police working in something like a post office, checking emails coming in, going out—but the population in China is very big,” so perhaps for 400 people sifting through e-mails, it’s not such an easy thing. “It’s like a funnel—every e-mail has to go through this funnel. One time I have a friend, an English tutor—he sent an e-mail off, then the secret police came and said they followed him until [he left]—that shows they are checking e-mails, it is true. They want to control it, and I guess they will control it—they are inventing that kind of technology to control the Internet and everything. Technology, of course, is a great thing, so we can hopefully have communication like that, but the Chinese government will definitely try to control it.”

Faith and Freedom

We asked Arjia Rinpoche whether the struggle in Tibet may be defined as a struggle between religious freedom and secularism, or between religion itself and atheism as preached by communist ideologues, or if behind the atheistic tradition of communism, there remained a shared religious heritage between Tibetans and Han Chinese through Buddhism that promises hope for reconciliation between the two peoples, and which could bring the two nations together through their shared spiritual heritage. He reflected that this was an “interesting question,” and recalled how during the 1950s, “they considered religion to be a poison. Why? I think that they understood religion was a very powerful force and that they really were very scared as religion can unify lots of people, no matter if you are Han, Tibetan or Mongolian, we can all come together with religion. So they were really scared of that kind of result, and used these terms [derived] from Marxism, or wherever they came from. And so after a few decades, they struggled, but there were no results, and still people believed. So, they changed their tone, but they still considered religion as a poison—they’re not really afraid of religion, but afraid of the power of religion. It is a big umbrella.” Indeed, during the March protests, “they assembled this time in almost fifty different regions, each

had this uprising, all came together. The Chinese are really afraid of that. Before said all religion was superstition, and that we should denounce them, get rid of the very bad influences, those kinds of things, and approach the modern ways. But then, Falun Gong emerged in the 1990s, rapidly spreading throughout China. As Arjia Rinpoche observed of the spread of the protests in March, it “reminded me of the Falun Gong, actually,” noting how “before, during the Cultural Revolution every religion was considered a poison and was denounced,” and that “only the Qigong could progress,” and was thus “allowed to continue.” Qigong can be described as a wide variety of traditional cultivation practices involving movement and/or regulated breathing designed for health maintenance purposes, as a sort of therapy. “The Qigong masters tried to find some other ideas from other religions,” and the idea of Falun Gong reflects the “Buddhist way” or the “Dharma wheel,” with its name derived from the “Gong” in “Qigong,” and the “Falu” meaning the “Dharma wheel.”

Arjia Rinpoche recalled that it “became very popular, and lots of people practiced that.” The rising popularity concerned party officials, and they held a private meeting some ten or fifteen years ago at which they said, “Oh, we should be careful about the Falun Gong,” and this was a “secret meeting involving only a small number of very high level officials in China. And yet the next day, there were 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners around Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City and they had a big protest from Falun Gong. Oh wow, they really got scared,” since they “had a very secret meeting only yesterday, and a Falun Gong guy” was among them, showing that the “roots already had spread in the Chinese government to a very high level, and the information traveled so quickly using the Internet—just one e-mail spread out to thousands—then, the Chinese government didn’t concentrate so much on e-mail as so important, and didn’t pay attention—so from one e-mail, then 10,000 people demonstrated. They got really scared, and since that time they have tried to squash down the Falun Gong.” But despite government efforts to oppress this new religious movement, “it got bigger and bigger,” and this generates “one kind of reaction in China—like the Tibetan action,” which is officials deciding, “Now we really have to crack down,” as they did against Falun Gong then and as they do against Tibet now. “My point is that mainly the Chinese government denounces religion as a poison. For Falun Gong people there was no solution to [politically re-]educate them, as they still practice it even when in jail. But now they are using one solution—they give them a Buddhist book to read, to convert them to Buddhism—that means the Chinese government, the communist government, has no settled law on which way they can respond, which methods they can use, will use. For instance, the Panchen Lama thing, it’s a reincarnation thing—but even non-believers think, they’re very superstitious about reincarnation, how come it’s like that? But the Chinese, first of all they denounce it, then, they find out it is very useful, they find out the power of reincarnation is very useful—so now the government can come out and say you are the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, or you are not the reincarnation. How come you are a non-believer and try to really control the details of Buddhism: it makes no sense, but they still use it. The Chinese communist government really scares their people—even when dealing with a very peaceful demonstration, that almost always reminds them of just some other big kind of threat alert: that’s why they are so scared, and think ‘we have to crack them down’.”

Free Tibet... or Free China?

When Russian domination of Eastern Europe came to an end in 1989, and soon after that the Soviet Union itself broke apart into independent, sovereign states, it all seemed to happen very fast—with the East Bloc states winning their freedom over a period of several months as people-power demonstrations spread like a wildfire along the Iron Curtain. Then when the Wall came down, both physically and metaphorically, everything changed—almost overnight. We asked Arjia Rinpoche if the hope among Tibetans is for something like this to happen in Tibet and to permeate across the body politic of China, resulting in a sudden awakening of tolerance in Beijing much like that which came to Moscow during the final years of the Soviet Union—with a rediscovery of the central importance of religion to life, a renunciation of atheism as the official state religion, and a generational change in attitude toward the outlying peoples that were once

perceived as a threat to the motherland. He explained that he believes that “in China, even the Communists are very, you know, thinking about that kind of thing too. Some have even a little bit of a concept—maybe a little bit today—to think like federalism, like in Russia, for the different provinces, like they are different little countries, those kind of things, those kinds of structures. They’re thinking about this, but again once you are thinking this way, once you are on this position, you will say, ‘No, no, no!’ Something that is against the central government, they will say no—so always that stuff happens. I guess something could happen; inside, China has a very different kind of conflict. It’s like, you’re father and my father; your bases and my bases are in between these conflicts, it’s very, very complicated. People didn’t mention that, I don’t know why—every authority, like Hu Jintao, and before him, Jiang Zemin—every person that became a president of China, recognized a bunch of people as some kind of General, offering them some kind of promotions like that—and giving them a very high position like that, and honors them like that—that says something. The message is: ‘You are my people! You are on my side.’ . . . And the military is another different problem facing China; every authority tries to control them at every moment—after a new presidential [inauguration] ceremony, they are wearing some new kind of military uniform, a style thing: ‘You’re the general of some kind,’ something like that—it’s a big problem in China, the military. And also the farmers and the students. And the, you know, the intellectuals like the teachers, professors, scientists—everyone has their own view, and a different outlook to the conflict here, but it’s very subtle. I hope that a big thing, coming from where, has to come from China, not from other places. Tibetans and everybody involved in the struggle have a lot of hope for a Free Tibet, but now we should say a ‘Free China.’ That is our hope.”

External vs. Internal Influences

Some analysts have argued that young Tibetans are rejecting the Dalai Lama’s advocacy of nonviolence, having grown frustrated after half a century of talk without positive results, and they have attributed this in part to the success by independence seekers in what was the Serbian province of Kosovo, which launched a campaign of terror and insurgency against Serbian officials in their quest for independence, ultimately winning broad international support for their declaration of independence on February 17, just a few weeks before the Tibetan uprising began. Kosovo, with two million inhabitants, is 90 percent Albanian Muslim, and thus ethnically distinct from the rest of Serbia, and a decade ago, Serbia had tried to ethnically cleanse the province of its Muslim majority during the last of the Balkan wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, an effort thwarted by NATO military action. We were wondering if young Tibetans, in their increasingly boldly asserted aspirations for true, sovereign independence and not just the autonomy sought by the Dalai Lama, took inspiration from Kosovo’s successful effort against a larger, mightier, and ruthless foe, and thus emulated its use of violence in its quest for independence. Arjia Rinpoche did not see a direct impact, given the isolation in Tibet from the world media, though he noted “maybe it’s different outside Tibet, where Tibetans may have this kind of reaction or inspiration. But inside, I don’t think so, it’s totally different inside” where it’s “almost impossible to learn about that kind of thing in China, so it doesn’t make sense. We can struggle, we can hope—but still, there is nothing.”

We also have noted how the recent uprising by Tibetans follows only by a few months the Saffron revolution, where a similarly widespread rebellion led by Buddhist monks against a military dictatorship in neighboring Burma spontaneously erupted, with information quickly spreading around the world by Internet. We’ve been wondering if and how recent in events in Tibet might be inspired by the monks’ rebellion in Burma—and if the Burmese government’s successful crackdown suggests that Beijing may respond similarly, and crush the yearning so eloquently articulated by the Tibetan monks. Arjia Rinpoche believes the Saffron revolution may have had a “a little bit” of an impact on Tibet, but added, “I don’t think a lot because the Chinese government realized that before the people paid attention to it, and China’s newspapers and TV news never showed it—so maybe a little bit, but not really very much, I don’t think.”

Religious Freedom

Arjia Rinpoche said he recalled being asked by a journalist, "Why is it the monks always protest? Shouldn't they stay in the monastery—why do they get involved in political things?"

To this, he responded: "I say no, if you have freedom of religion they won't do anything—but if you don't have freedom of religion then the monks will protest. In Burma that happened, and Chinese monks did protest before—as we don't have freedom of religion. If there's no freedom in school, the students will protest. And if there's no freedom in the army, the army will protest. It is the same for monks—they will protest. This is a regular thing."

References

1. Interview with the author, April 4, 2008.